

**MASSACHUSETTS NATIONAL GUARD
FAMILY PROGRAM OFFICE**

**Family Readiness Group
Handbook**

1. WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS HANDBOOK?

The purpose is to provide information on unit FAMILY READINESS GROUPS (FRG). It gives the goals of an FRG, provides instruction on its organization, offers suggested activities, and explains what support the Guard can provide. The FRG is a program for families and should be run by families. Membership and participation in an FRG are strictly voluntary. The information in this handbook is deliberately general in nature, rather than specific, to encourage your creativity and innovation.

2. WHAT IS A FAMILY READINESS GROUP?

An FRG is an officially sanctioned organization of officer and enlisted personnel and their family members. This group provides information and acts as a support network for families and guard members during their association with the unit, especially during periods of separation, e.g., weekend drills, annual training deployments, and/or mobilization. As an officially sanctioned program, it has the following components:

- Standard operating procedures or guidelines that establish goals, scope, structure and responsibilities for the FRG as a mission related family support program (see Appendix A).
- Command linkage to demonstrate active support for and approval of FRG activities (see Appendix B).
- One or more designated FRG representatives whose volunteer services have been accented by the commander (see Appendix C).
- A formalized and actively on-going communication and support network to link family members and the chain of command, for example, a telephone tree and/or command letter.
- Incorporation of the FRG into the unit's deployment family assistance plan.

The above components must be included in order for an organization to be officially sanctioned as a FAMILY READINESS GROUP.

3. WHY SHOULD WE FORM A FAMILY READINESS GROUP?

There are many reasons to form a Family Readiness Group, but some of the goals you should strive for are as follows:

- To develop family support networks through which families mutually support each other.

- To provide a communication network between the unit and family members.
- To improve family awareness of the organization of the military unit, its mission and activities.
- To develop activities that improve the quality of life for the guard member and family.
- To encourage participation of family members in activities that supports the unit.
- To educate family members on the benefits and entitlements that are available to the Massachusetts National Guard family.
- To be prepared in the event of mobilization.
- To assure guard members that their families will have support in their absence thereby enabling the guard member to focus on the mission.

4. WHO ARE THE MEMBERS OF A FAMILY READINESS GROUP?

There are two types of FRG members:

a. Volunteers. FRG volunteers are appointed representatives or committee members responsible for a variety of FRG projects and activities. Volunteers may be guard members, spouses, children, parents, grandparents, brothers, and sisters – any member of the family who is interested in supporting the unit. You may also want to consider inviting civilians and military retirees in the local area. Their knowledge and experience could be invaluable to your efforts, and many retirees would be happy to become “reconnoiter” to the Guard.

b. Program Participants. These are recipients of FRG services who, for example, attend classes, seminars and social events sponsored by volunteers.

5. CAN A FAMILY READINESS GROUP BE MANDATORY?

Absolutely not! Your group’s success depends on volunteers. There is no quicker way to turn off volunteers than to tell them they “must”.

6. WHAT IS THE QUICKEST WAY FOR A FRG TO FAIL?

There are two things that will guarantee failure:

a. Not having the approval and support of the unit commander. Without command approval and support you cannot function. See Appendix B for sample memorandum of approval. Remember, the letter will have to be reissued upon change of command or change in point of contact.

b. Not having an official link to the chain of command. The commander should appoint a single point of contact (POC) to whom you can go for assistance and information. Much of your information for the newsletter and telephone tree (see Question 10) will come from that person. Obviously, this is a person with whom you'll want to establish a good working relationship.

7. HOW DO WE BEGIN?

This may disappoint you: there is no single way to start a Family Readiness Group. You may want to contact other spouses to determine their interest or if your unit has an annual Christmas party or summer picnic, that would be a good time to discuss it with others.

Another way is to go directly to the commander of the unit to express interest and solicit his/her support. Commanders are authorized to conduct family-oriented Multiple Unit Training Assemblies up to 8 hours annually (NGB 600-12/ANG 211-1). National Guard Commanders are authorized to include families in information briefings (NGR 350-1). This would be a good way to bring families in and have the Commander explain the Family Readiness Group concept and ask for interested individuals to meet with him or his representative at a later time.

You will just have to look at your own local situation, discuss it with other interested individuals, and decide the best way to proceed. What works in one unit may not necessarily work in another.

8. HOW DOES A FRG DETERMINE ITS LEADERSHIP?

That's your choice. You may have a council appointed by the Commander or you may wish to elect the leadership group. If you decide on an appointed council, the commander may ask for a list of nominations. In any case, the command should officially confirm the leadership of the FRG.

Whoever serves in whatever capacity should do it willingly? Don't try to force it on anyone. And above all, the leader does not have to be the Commander's wife or the first sergeant's wife. The leader can be whoever emerges either through election or appointment.

You may want to give some thought to continuity. If your leader's spouse is transferring to another unit or retiring soon, then the leader should "hand over the reins" well before leaving the unit. An FRG should not be personality driven, but should function smoothly through a change in leadership.

9. DO WE NEED A CONSTITUTION AND BY-LAWS?

Not if you're an FRG. Remember, you'll have a local guideline or standard operating procedures. (See Appendix A).

10. WHAT ARE SOME FAMILY READINESS GROUP ACTIVITIES?

Family Readiness Group activities can be as varied as the number of members. This is where your own good ideas and creativity can go to work. Your activities must match your group. Consider the average age, backgrounds, and interests of your group. Once again, an activity that was a huge success in one unit may very well not succeed in another.

There are, however, four activities that are generally considered to be critical to the success of a Family Readiness Group.

a. Outreach. You probably have families in the unit who have no contact with the unit and have little or no knowledge of the Massachusetts National Guard. You should establish an outreach program to make contact with as many families as possible. This can be done by letter, phone call, or a personal visit. Your unit POC can provide you with a roster of soldiers with addresses and phone numbers. You are authorized to use the unit telephone for the purpose of contacting other families with information about the FRG.

b. Sponsorship. New guard members periodically join the unit and by regulation are supposed to be formally sponsored by a member of the unit – someone to help the new guard member get to the first drill, meet the other members, give an idea of the unit's mission, etc. But the family is often overlooked. Members of the FRG can help sponsor new families. This is very similar to the Welcome Wagon Program you may be familiar with in your civilian community. Your sponsorship program need not be elaborate. Again, it may be a phone call, letter or visit. Through whatever means, express a warm welcome. This is an excellent way to recruit new volunteers for the Family Readiness Group.

c. Command Letters. Your group may be scattered over several towns so regular get-togethers are almost impossible. Everyone will probably still want to keep up with what's happening in the unit. A command letter is the best way to keep people informed as well as involved. You can use official mail to mail command letters to the family at their home address (see Question 14). If your unit simply cannot afford the mail costs, you may want to raise funds for this purpose (see Question 21). Your command letter must contain official information as determined by the commander. For instance, upcoming training events and dates, benefits and entitlements, legislation affecting the Massachusetts National Guard, unit news such as changes of command and announcements of Family Readiness Group activities. Many command letters have recurring sections such as "News from the Commander", "The Chaplain's Corner" or an "Atta Boy" section that contains news of promotions, graduations, awards, etc.

d. Telephone Tree. A telephone tree is a system through which you can quickly get information out to your group. Obviously, it would not be used except in emergency, probably during annual training or Federal or State mobilization. A telephone tree serves as your rumor control-your members learn to disregard all rumors and rely on the information that comes through the telephone tree.

A telephone tree works like this—the group leader receives accurate information from the unit POC and then calls two or three other designated people. These people are then responsible for calling a certain three or four others, and so on until everyone in the unit has been contacted. You may want to consider establishing a telephone tree based on geography so that long distance calls are kept to a minimum.

You'll want to be sure to tell everyone to get alternate phone numbers for the people they're responsible for calling—work number, parent's number, neighbor's number, etc.

e. Other suggested Activities:

1. Family member training. Guard members receive all sorts of training for their military jobs, but families are generally overlooked. Needless to say, that will not be sufficient in case of mobilization. Various members of the chain of command will be willing to give classes on subjects that you really need to know about. A few examples are; mission of the unit; preparing for mobilization; benefits and entitlements; the Survivor Benefit Plan; and the Massachusetts National Guard in general.

You can also contact your State Family Program Office for support or ask local “helping” agencies such as the Armed Services YMCA, American Red Cross, and county and state agencies in distributing information. If you live near a military installation, they may also be an avenue of support.

Do not forget the fun classes—crafts, decorating, fashion shows, etc. This is where you really want to remember the ages of your participants. We all have different interests at different stages in our lives.

2. Your Activities. Include the children. They are probably as interested in as much “military knowledge” as you. Sponsor activities that will show the kids some of the things the guard members do. Let the kids bring their friends—they sometimes have a hard time explaining to their friends why Mom or Dad is often not around. Work with the local schools to have National Guard Day at the School (the local recruiter should be very interested in helping on this one). There are a number of activities that can be conducted for the kids. Ask them. You may be surprised at some of their ideas.

3. Employer Support. We cannot stress enough the importance of Employer Support of the Guard. Any soldier who has had to ask for extra time off can vouch for that. Help the unit sponsor “bosses night”, or encourage your group to individually ask the boss to dinner or some similar activity. Invite employers to Family Day activities. Let the employers see that the family supports the unit. Sponsor an Employer Award Program. And be sure you get local newspaper coverage—a little free publicity for the employers—they'll love it.

4. Volunteer Recognition. To have a really good Family Readiness Group will depend on the time and efforts of dedicated volunteers. It can't happen any other way. But volunteers will not go on indefinitely without recognition of their efforts. Recognition

can be in many forms—a simple “thank you” or “good job” to formal awards presented by the commander in the presence of both guard and family members. You can also consider a letter of commendation from the commander and/or Family Readiness Group leader. With the support of the unit POC, you can devise a unit award such as (Company B involved Family Award, FRG Volunteer of the Quarter Award), or check current regulations for awards already prepared for volunteers. Recognition takes time and patience but is well worth it. This is another activity that deserves local newspaper coverage. Let the civilian community know of the good works of your volunteers.

5. Social Activities. Never, ever underestimate the value of social activities. This is where real bonding among group members takes place. The unit Holiday party, summer picnic, Halloween party, spring fling, etc. Plan as many as your market will bear. Not everyone will be able to attend every event, but those who do attend and enjoy themselves will be a draw for others to attend the next event. You’ll want some activities for adults only and others to include the children.

11. IS THERE ANY SPECIFIC ORMAT FOR A FRG COMMAND LETTER?

No. You and your editor may have to experiment before you find a format that you’re comfortable with. Excellent guidelines for command letters are contained in DA Pamphlet 608-47, paragraph 4-2.

12. HOW OFTEN SHOULD PUBLISH A COMMAND LETTER?

Whatever suits’ your needs. You may publish your letter quarterly, semi-annually, bi-monthly, or as needed, experiment, don’t decide right away. Determine how much information you have to publish and see what works best.

13. SHOULD THE FRG MEET ON A REGULAR BASIS?

Whatever meets your FRG needs? Examine your goals and objectives and determine how much meeting time you will need to successfully address them.

14. CAN WE USE OFFICIAL MAIL TO SEND FRG COMMAND LETTERS?

Family Readiness Groups are authorized to use official mail to mail consolidated information packets to the guard members’ home address. These mailing must support the commander’s morale, welfare, and recreation (MWR) programs. Commanders are the approving authority for the use of official mail within their command. Commanders should be encouraged to make a conscious decision on the use of official mail to support their morale, welfare and recreation programs. The use of official mail by an FRG is a privilege, not a right. Official mail may not be used to send social items such as ethnic recipes, birth announcement, bowling league scores, or information on revenue producing items or events. (AR 340-3, para 3-2 and 3-3; DOD 4525.8, para E.1.D and E.3.B; HQDA CEIM-PP Msg, DTG 0919082 Jun 87).

15. CAN WE GET THE NAMES, ADDRESS and TELEPHONE NUMBERS OF OTHER FAMILY MEMBERS?

Yes. When your FRG has an official need for access to the names, addresses and telephone numbers of guard and family members (for example, to mail command letter or to develop a telephone tree), the release of their names is permissible. This information must only be used for the purpose for which it was requested. It cannot be used for another purpose, nor can it be transferred or loaned to another activity. The family members who use this information must be sensitive to the need to maintain the confidentiality of this information (AR 608-1, para 2-7).

16. WHAT SUPPORT IS THE GUARD AUTHORIZED TO PROVIDE TO THE FRG?

Once your Family Readiness Group is approved and re-organized as an official command program, the Guard is authorized to provide you and your volunteers a variety of support. Please note the word authorized—the unit is authorized to provide the below listed support when it is available. This does not mean the commander must provide all these things to the detriment of the unit.

- a. Office space, to include desk and office supplies; use of the armory for FRG activities and functions; access to official telephone lines. (AR 608-1, para 4-4a).
- b. Use of Guard mailing privileges for official correspondence, newsletters, activity fliers, welcome packets. (AR 340-3, para 3-2 and 3-3).
- c. Use of official vehicles if available. (AR 608-1, para 4-4c).
- d. Bus support if available. (AR 58-1, para 5-5).
- e. Money to purchase information materials for family members.
- f. Army or Air Regulations and guidance materials such as DA Pam 608-47, A Guide to Establishing Family Support Groups; AR 210-1, Private Organizations; AR 608-1, Army Community Service; AR 340-3, Official Mail, Cost Control Program; DA Pam 360-525, Family Assistance Handbook for Mobilization; DA Pam 608-43, A Guide to Family Member Pre-deployment Briefings; NGR 600-12, National Guard Family Program; and TAGMA Pamphlets 608 series.
- g. Army, Air, NGB or Civilian Personnel Office certificates of recognition for outstanding volunteer service.

17. ARE VOLUNTEERS LIABLE FOR THE INJURY OF SOMEONE ATTENDING AN OFFICIAL FUNCTION IN THE ARMORY OR AT THE BASE?

It would be unusual for a volunteer to personally cause the injury of another at an official function. However, the possibility does exist for a volunteer to intentionally or unintentionally

cause the personal injury of another. In that case, the volunteer would be open to liability. One would suspect that most injuries caused on these occasions would be due to structural defects in the building is responsible, and could be held liable for the injury if negligence is proven.

18. ARE FRG VOLUNTEERS COVERED FOR LIABILITY?

FRG volunteers were included for coverage under tort claims and workmen's compensation by Title 10, United States Code, Section 1588 in 1983. Remember, though, that no one is unconditionally covered under tort claims. Certain standards are evaluated. The most important one is whether the person/volunteer was acting within the scope of his/her duties or job description. The military is only liable for those volunteer activities that it has accepted and authorized.

Coverage under tort claims also does not preclude the individual from being sued. If this should happen, a military lawyer will be provided to the volunteer. In this situation, it is important that the person is qualified, and/or had been trained and supervised to do the job for which he/she was recruited.

Individuals who volunteer are not advised to purchase individual insurance. The military is more likely to be sued than the individual because the United States government has more assets with which to pay any judgments.

19. ARE FRG VOLUNTEERS COVERED FOR LIABILITY WHEN DRIVING A VEHICLE AND SOMEONE IS INJURED OR PROPERTY DAMAGED?

Use of a privately owned vehicle to perform volunteer services should be avoided as much as possible, especially if it involves the transport of others. If one is used, be sure that the job description makes specific mention as to whether or not the regular use of motor vehicle, private or government owned, is required, and, if required, the specific volunteer duties that will be performed while using the vehicle. If you regularly use our vehicle to perform volunteer duties, be sure that the car is inspected and maintained in accordance with local safety procedures.

Use of a vehicle to and from places of domicile and duty are usually covered outside the scope of volunteer services and coverage.

If while driving a vehicle in the performance of official duties, property is damaged or injury or death results to anyone, including a volunteer, an official (commander, first sergeant, unit technician) from the unit should be told immediately. This person should notify the area claims authority or claims processing authority. The servicing staff Judge Advocate should also be contacted for assistance in the investigation and processing of claims arising out of volunteer services.

20. FOR WHAT PURPOSES CAN INVITATIONAL TRAVEL ORDERS BE ISSUED FOR FRG VOLUNTEERS?

Invitational Travel Orders (ITO) can be issued for FRG volunteers to attend job-related conferences, seminars, or symposiums for the purpose of conferring or consulting with other military volunteers or volunteer supervisors, and/or civilian volunteers, Department of Army/Air Force, and/or Department of Defense officials. ITOs cannot be issued strictly for training purposes. (AR 608-1, para 4-4b).

21. CAN WE RAISE FUNDS?

Family members can participate in fundraising activities as long as accounting procedures are established. This can be done through the establishment of an *informal or private fund*.

In establishing an informal or private fund, you must ensure that your fund's net worth **does not exceed \$1,000** at any one time, and that a fund custodian or treasurer is appointed/elected to balance and account for the funds. Your Treasurer must, on a semi-annual basis, provide the group leader and the commander a financial status of the account. This semi-annual report will be forwarded to the State Family Program Office.

If your net worth exceeds \$1,000, family member volunteers must be willing to form a private organization in support of Family Readiness Group programs to continue fundraising activities.

The private organization and Family Readiness Group are not one in the same because an approved Family Readiness Group cannot be a private organization. Also, private organizations cannot receive a great deal of support from the Guard.

22. CAN MILITARY BUS SUPPORT BE PROVIDED FOR FRG ACTIVITIES?

Bus support can be provided on a non-reimbursable basis to support the commander's morale and welfare mission (category III B activities, as outlined in DOD Directive 1015.1).

The Massachusetts National Guard has buses and they can be used on a limited, as available, basis to support the command's morale and welfare programs. Availability, of course, will depend on Guard use. If trips are to be made on a recurring basis, the commander should consider commercial bus service. A once a year trip would not generally be considered "recurring trip".

(AR 58-1, para 505 and HQ DA DALO-TSP-CV message, DTG 312111Z Oct 85, DOL Directive 1015.1)

23. WHAT IF WE DON'T GET EVERYONE INVOLVED?

It is unrealistic to expect 100% participation. Some family members will not be interested or may not have time to participate. Some guard members may not want their families to take an active part. You can only do your best to invite each and every family to participate. Those who chose not to participate should still be kept continually up to date of all unit activities and information. Successful Family Readiness Groups are those that meet the unique needs of their guard members and families.